

The Radicalization of the Superheroes

By Lindsy Van Gelder and Lawrence Van Gelder

"...The people who turned away from the unreal world of comic books a decade or more ago may well find themselves surprised—and perhaps even outraged—at the new politics of pulp..."

I began to see that Superman was a punk, that Superman didn't relate to replenishing the earth, like Huey Newton and other real people do. In essence, Superman is a phony and a fake. He never saves any black people in this country in any comic book stories.

—Bobby Seale, Chairman, Black Panther Party, in *Seize the Time*

Not any more, Chairman Bobby. Superman's been getting his thing together.

Where kryptonite, ray guns and the inspired madness of generations of evil fiends toiling in the shadow of spider webs to the echo of demented laughter have failed, *tsuris, angst* and guilt have conquered.

It will never be the same again with Superman, nor with the others of the caped and cowled legions that fill the pantheon of superheroes. No longer is it possible to go home again to the golden age of comic books, to the safe, secure, predictable world of superheroes menaced by no more than an occasional natural disaster, a monster lurching amuck, a pointy-shoed hood, a Kraut lieutenant, or—God forbid—the loss of their secret identity.

Buying a comic book today is spend-

ing fifteen cents for the *New York Times* with four-color art and guys in capes playing the role of The Wasp, an exercise in futility usually assigned by the *Times* on a rotating basis to John Lindsay, Nelson Rockefeller and Richard Nixon. (Nixon, who wishes the golden age of Commie-zapping would return, sometimes farms out his assignments to his sidekick, Spiro Agnew.) To turn the pages of comic books today is to revisit not the old world of good and evil and of virtue triumphant on a field of craven yeggs, but to plunge to the nostrils in the bleeped-up world of today.

Here they are, folks: See the blacks sitting in at the State Office site at 125th Street; see the cops straining at the leash; see the Young Lords seize a building and take service on an injunction; see whitey try the old hogwash and watch him fail; take a look at a sky raining a pox of filth and rivers resembling closeups of Campbell's Chunky soups.

Is it Metropolis, where good old Clark Kent and his spine of *gehackte leber* used to conceal the impervious *kishkas* of Superman? Is it Gotham, where Bruce Wayne and his adorable

ward, Dick Grayson, used to don their Bat duds under the old manse?

Hell, no, it's New York, no matter what they call it. And when today's superheroes travel a bit they find people starving in Appalachia, politicians and public officials wallet-high in sellouts, homicidal hippie-cultists fomenting race-war, American Indians still trying to find the treat in a treaty, and heroes of Hollywood Westerns practicing virulent super-patriotism instead of The Method.

Do the superheroes fare any better than our politicians in finding the solutions to bigotry, oppression, corruption, pollution and inequality? The answer is no. Like ordinary humans elevated to power, the best they can do is raise the questions, point the way, and hope.

But the recognition of the limits of power among the superheroes, and beyond that their accelerating social consciousness, their deepening anxiety, the proliferation of their neuroses, their increasing involvement in issues with no clear solutions, and most of all, their burgeoning radicalization, have restored excitement, interest and merit to a once-crippled industry.

Comic books, damned by parents, reviled by psychologists, denounced from pulpits and nearly borne away on a riptide of criticism in the mid-fifties, are in the throes of revolutionary change.

Children and the young at heart who stood by the superheroes in the years of their travail and ostracism, who endured their fantastic irrelevance and patent absurdity, who witnessed their brief deification on the altar of camp, have long known that the change was in progress. Today the pace is quickening, and those who turned away from the unreal world of comic books a decade or more ago may well find themselves surprised—and perhaps outraged—at the new politics of pulp.

Like other members of the establishment, superheroes are finding them-



Ghetto violence: Firebrand, a disillusioned activist turned villain. "Iron Man" Comics.



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OCT.
NO. 80

GREEN LANTERN GREEN ARROW

CO-STARRING

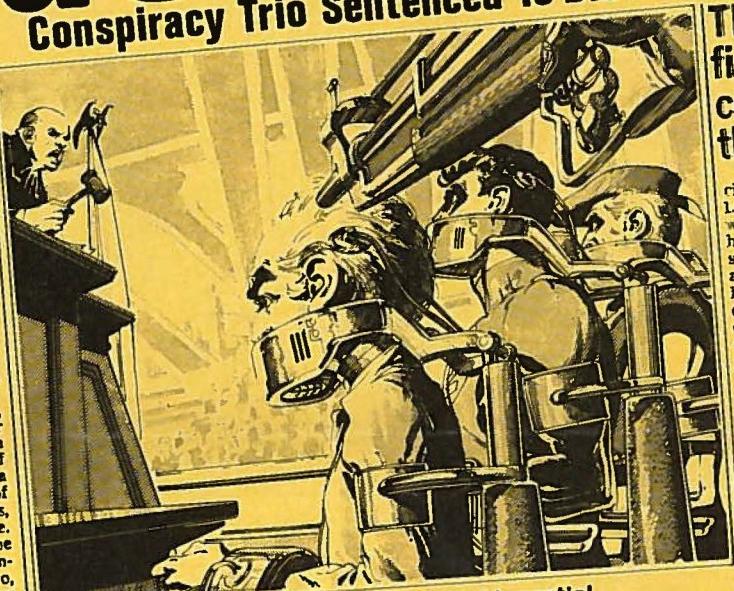
GUILTY!

Conspiracy Trio Sentenced To Die!

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Judge Says Trial Was Fair And Impartial.

Justice prevailed today as three men were sentenced to the death-chamber for "crimes against humanity"! One, a member of the famous Green Lantern Corps, protested the evidence and moved for a retrial. The motion was denied without prejudice by the presiding judge of Intergalactic Court, Genocide Division.

Chicago ripoff: The conspiracy trial lives in pulp. "Green Lantern and Green Arrow" Comics.

selves on the receiving end of tough questions raised not by the yokels who used to ask, "Who was that man?" or "Is it a bird, a plane . . . ?" In a de-emphasis on inter-galactic exploits, the superheroes are facing questions raised on blighted urban streets by angry blacks, troubled whites and concerned, embittered social workers.

Remember Green Arrow, the technological Robin Hood of the comic books, and Green Lantern, the ray-slinger? Radicalization overtook them last spring, in the form of a shabby black man who appeared while the two superheroes were arguing the merits of rescuing a fat, white slumlord from a gang of bottle-heaving kids. To Green Lantern, the kids were "anarchists."

Then the black man turned up. "I been readin' about you," he said. "How

you worked for the Blue Skins. And how on a planet someplace you helped out the Orange Skins. And you done considerable for the Purple Skins. Only there's skins you never bothered with—the black skins! I want to know—how come? Answer me that, Mr. Green Lantern!"

His powerful body slumped, his hands open helplessly, his head bowed, Green Lantern whispered: "I . . . can't."

Since then, Green Arrow and Green Lantern have taken off on an Easy-Rider-type tour of the country. "Listen," Green Arrow told his supercolleague, "forget about chasing around the galaxy, and remember America! It's a good country . . . beautiful . . . fertile . . . and terribly sick! There are children dying . . . honest people cowering in fear . . . disillusioned kids ripping up

campuses! On the streets of Memphis a good *black* man died . . . and in Los Angeles, a good *white* man fell. Something is wrong! Something is killing us all! Some hideous moral cancer is rotting our very souls!"

In their travels, Green Lantern and Green Arrow have helped poor whites in Appalachia topple a corrupt mine-owner, tangled with a Charlie Manson-style cult on the West Coast, defended an Indian tribe from white man's greed, and gone on trial for conspiracy before a madman who binds and gags them, makes his own rules and bears a suspicious resemblance to Abbie Hoffman's favorite judge.

A month or so ago, good old Superman, in a retrospective episode in issue No. 393 of *Action Comics*, found himself asking the operator of a storefront academy, "You mean you left college to bury yourself in this SLUM just to educate these hoodlums?"

Superman found himself hearing, "These slum kids have auto dumps instead of playgrounds . . . fire hydrants instead of swimming pools . . . people here have to scrounge around for a bare existence! Could you survive in this jungle without super-powers? While you're off preventing disasters on remote worlds, who prevents disaster in your own backyard? It's time you did something for *these* people!"

So Superman turned on with his heat vision and his steel fists to demolish a block of abandoned tenements. Then he told the ghetto folks to try a little self-help to finish the rebuilding job themselves. "Remember," he thundered, "as American citizens, you've got a mighty super-power of your own—the vote!"

Jimmy Olsen—you remember Jimmy, that gutsy, eager kid who has been a cub at the *Daily Planet* for about 30 years—well, Jimmy recently exposed "the secret slumlord of Metropolis," a wealthy philanthropist.

What's more, Jimmy led a delegation of blacks who dumped roaches and rats on the slumlord's front lawn during a radical chic party. And Lois Lane—dear Lois, who used to spend her time harboring suspicions about Clark Kent and hankering for wedlock with Superman—well, she's musing about the oppression of women these days.

Batman has been turned into something of an urban guerrilla, and Robin has finally been shipped off to college, where the action really is.

Green Arrow and Green Lantern have also helped the Justice League of America—the superheroes' equivalent of SDS, including Superman, Batman and Black Canary—to fight for ecology. Their adventure begins with a tip from a night watchman at a dockside factory replete with billowing black smoke and

"...Iron Man is Marvel comics' answer to Richard Ottinger, who hews to his millions and his guilty white liberalism..."

gushing slime. "What that factory was manufaturin' was nothing but pollution," says the night watchman. "It was there deliberately to foul the air and water."

An appeal by the superheroes to the city manager brings the fascist-pig rebuff: "Take your bleeding heart and get out. That factory brings in thousands in taxes. We need the money. That conservation stuff is a lot of bunk."

The superheroes discover that the pollution factory is the creation of mutants from another planet who have

destroyed their own world, evolved into pollution-breathers and are now seeking new worlds to pollute and colonize. In the end, the creeps are routed, and Green Arrow and his girlfriend, Black Canary, stroll by the riverside in post-combat bliss. Black Canary says she is happy that the superheroes have saved Earth. Green Arrow looks over his shoulder at the factories, still belching smoke into the night sky.

"Did we?" he asks. "I wonder . . ."

Green Arrow's skepticism is typical of the new radicalized superhero. The

new Politics of Pulp is not simple—if it were, Superman could put himself out of business by razing the slums, replenishing the soil, ending poverty and prosperity in a single issue. Instead of turkey-basket liberalism, the superheroes are confining themselves to making clear that the future of the earth will be determined by its people.

Mixed in with the politics is another recent development—the super hangup.

Superman, who made his debut in 1938 and is now an untrustworthy over-



Women's Lib: Superheroines rough up superheroes in "The Avengers."



Just good friends: black scientist helps The Silver Surfer.

30, is but one in a ward of *angst*-ridden comics characters. "He's here, but he can't belong," explains Carmine Infantino, the editorial director for National Periodicals, the DC Comics group, whose ranks include the veteran man of steel, Batman, Green Lantern, Green Arrow and the Flash, to name a few.

According to Infantino, upcoming Superman adventures will focus increasingly on the Krypton-born Superman's sense of alienation on Earth. The change has already begun. Recently the man of might worked himself to the verge of the dread Excedrin headache when he contemplated his inability to have a normal family life (Lois' impatient availability notwithstanding).

"I'm Superman," the old boy *kvetched* as he flew through the skies. "The wealth of the world is at my command. I have powers beyond the dreams of mere mortals. Yes, I'm the man who has everything! But what wouldn't I give to have a son like Dan!"

Another new gimmick will pepper Superman's supermind with a soupçon of schizophrenia. At the touch of some exotic variety of kryptonite, an anti-matter Superman emerges, a dormant dark side of his personality whose each



Campus protest: What's a symbol of the establishment like Captain America to do when the issues aren't clear any more?

awakening drains his energies, stirs conflict and threatens destruction to the real Superman and the world.

Even Clark Kent, the mild-mannered newsman, is being updated. Gabe Pressman may not like this, but Clark Kent is invading television. God only knows what's going to happen should the two ever descend on Mario Procaccino at the same time, but Clark is just a working man, and the *Daily Planet* has been taken over by a conglomerate with broadcasting interests.

Wonder Woman, the Amazon in the star-spangled suit who used to zip around bouncing bullets off her bracelets, has lost her super powers completely, but gained admission to the ranks of liberated superheroines. Like Black Canary and Black Widow, she is a karate ace who depends on no man but romances with several. The Invisible Girl's husband helps her with the housework and shares the child care.

Even Lois Lane bitches when city editor Perry White passes her over for a dangerous assignment. "That's not fair, Perry," she grumbles. "You're discriminating against me because I'm a woman! I protest!"

The angst, guilt and awareness now

beginning to afflict the DC superheroes have raged for years among their principal rivals for the affections of comic-book lovers, the Marvel superheroes.

This trend-setting group, spawned by the remarkable Stan Lee, boasts the Fantastic Four, quarreling among themselves and losing money on the stock

market; Invisible Girl and her husband, Mr. Fantastic, fretting about the lack of time they can devote to their infant son; the Incredible Hulk, wandering the earth and cursing his ugliness; Daredevil and Captain America, trying to cope with perplexing romantic lives; and the extraordinary Spider-Man.

Spider-Man, the favorite superhero on college campuses, owes his powers to radioactivity and his *tsuris* to acne, trouble with his grades, difficulty with his girlfriends and a chronic shortage of money.

Not every superhero has gone radical, however. One of Marvel Comics' most interesting creations is Iron Man, the comics' answer to Richard Ottinger, who hews to his millions and his guilty white liberalism.

When not encased in the outfit that gives him his name, Iron Man is Tony Stark, a munitions magnate who inhabits a mansion, pals around with U.S. senators, keeps a few skyscrapers in his portfolio and operates a foundation. Tony was just another guy with the looks and assets of Howard Hughes until he went to Vietnam about ten years ago and was blown to pieces. Escaping death, Tony fashioned for



Teenage and super: Spider-Man, in reality a student, gets politicized.



Ecology: Submariner, above and right, vs. the polluters of sea and land.

himself a ferrous maxi, the technocrat's dream-suit of valves, blasters, transistors, computers and other gadgetry. Iron Man is the New Capitalist Hero—the triumph of military-industrial know-how and good-guy instincts over the forces of evil and a damaged heart. He spends a lot of his time fighting duels with Castro-like Caribbean leaders and pitting his skills against Soviet super-heroes who fight dirty.

Between punches, he is given to Silent Majority sermonettes, like "Lucky for you, I'm not a Red—I can't continue to attack a helpless enemy" and "You made the worst mistake a Red can make—you challenged a foe who isn't afraid of you."

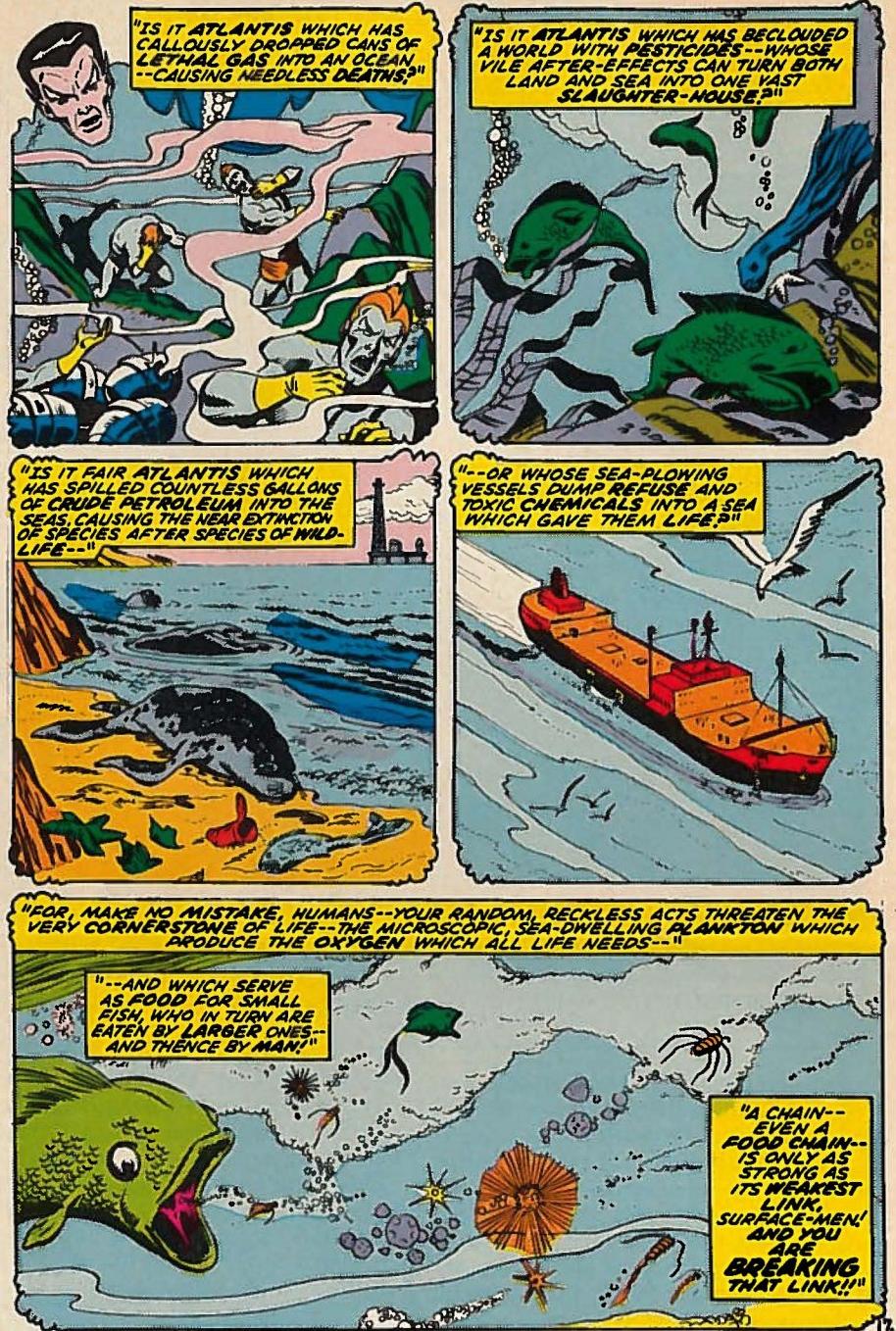
But Iron Man can be challenged right here in America. One recent adventure—published not long after police cleared black militant squatters from the State Office Building site at 125th Street—pits Iron Man against a Panthereque superhero named Firebrand.

The story begins with a flaming clenched fist searing through a fence erected on the site of a new community center financed by the Iron Man Foundation. "Anything the Man puts up, I'm ready to tear down," announces Firebrand.

The next day, Tony Stark and City Councilman Lyle Bradshaw arrive for groundbreaking ceremonies, only to find that Firebrand and the militants have occupied the land. "This is gonna be a *community* center, man!" a brother in a beret tells the white cops. "Well, we're part of the community, dig it? And we're stayin' until we get listened to."

"No ground's gettin' broken, no construction's gettin' done until we have some say in what goes here! Maybe a community center is good for a lotta white consciences, but it ain't what the blacks on the North Side want!"

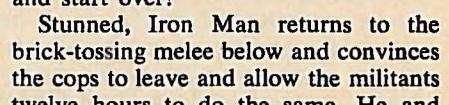
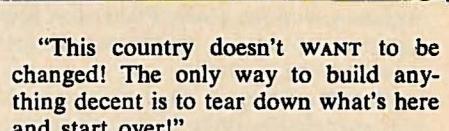
Councilman Bradshaw promptly rips up the militants' list of demands—for black construction workers and black control of the center's functions—and orders the cops to clear them out.



MARVEL COMICS GROUP

"I won't allow an irate minority to bully the North Side community out of something it so obviously needs," fumes Bradshaw. "You can't reason with animals!"

A riot ensues, and Firebrand and Iron Man take to the rooftops for a little *mano a mano*. "You'd like to believe that I'm just part of a neat little criminal plot," Firebrand raps as he clobbers. "A commie, a pinko! . . . Well, I'm just an all-American boy, Iron Man. One of those wide-eyed innocents who started out to make this nation a 'better place.' I sat in for civil rights, marched for peace and demonstrated on campus . . . and got chased by vicious police dogs, spat on by bigots, beat on by 'patriots,' choked by tear gas and blinded by Mace, until I finally caught on . . .



"This country doesn't **WANT** to be changed! The only way to build anything decent is to tear down what's here and start over!"

Stunned, Iron Man returns to the brick-tossing melee below and convinces the cops to leave and allow the militants twelve hours to do the same. He and a few moderate blacks—who have been denounced as Uncle Toms—go to Bradshaw's office and try to work things out. Bradshaw is adamant and accuses the group of "knuckling under to criminals"—at which point Firebrand bursts through the window, shouting: "The people won't wait any more! We're not waiting to have the world handed to us! It's ours for the taking." In the scuffle that follows, Firebrand blows open the councilman's safe, revealing that Brad-

"...Even Lois Lane bitches when Perry White passes her over. 'You're discriminating against me because I'm a woman....'"

shaw is the secret head of the realty and construction firms that stand to profit from the center.

As Bradshaw is carted off in cuffs, Firebrand hurls his parting shot at Iron Man. "I'll wait to fight another day. History's on my side!" As Firebrand zips off, a cop asks Iron Man if he feels he has failed by not capturing the super-militant.

"It's not Firebrand's escaping that bothers me," says the shaken liberal. "It's wondering where the rest of us went wrong—that someone like him should have to come into being at all!"

He walks off brooding, iron head down.

Firebrand is just one of a squad of superblacks ripping around in the pages of Marvel Comics. There is the Falcon, who looks like Jim Brown, lives in Harlem and preaches against extremists of both races. There is also T'Challa, the Black Panther, an African prince who teaches Afro-American studies in his civilian guise and is given to agonizing over whether his true place is in the ranks of superheroes with his white friends or among his own people. In Marvel Comics, blacks are even villains as well as students, cops, reporters, love

of the old innocence will find Archie, Jughead, Veronica and Betty still cavorting between shiny covers, along with Casper the friendly ghost, the Disney characters and an assortment of Western characters and hot-rod fetishists.

But the trend toward topicality that has captured the affections of a sophisticated new generation of readers seems clearly traceable to Marvel's Lee, a tall, bearded man who looks like Rex Harrison and regards himself as the world's most prolific short-story writer.

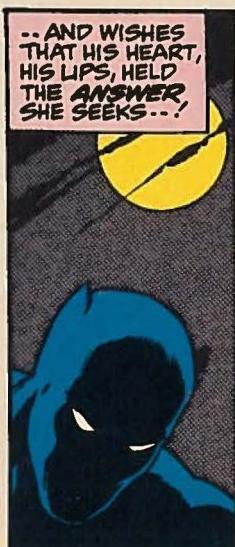
Lee entered the comics business 30 years ago as a seventeen-year-old office

MARVEL COMICS GROUP



The red and the black: Marvel superheroes include an American Indian, Red Wolf (above) and (below) an African prince, The Black Panther.

MARVEL COMICS GROUP



story principals and just about anything else anyone is likely to be.

Stan Lee, the inventive Marvel editor, has had blacks in his stories for so many years that he can say with justification, "I don't even think it's worthy of comment."

Like GM and Ford, Marvel and DC (National Periodicals) stand in the forefront of an industry dominated by half a dozen publishers responsible for estimated sales this year of more than 300 million comic books under at least 200 different titles. The industry is committed to general appeal. National Periodicals as well as Magazine Management, the parent concern of Marvel, puts out a general line that embraces romance and whimsy. Readers looking for a little

boy and found himself an editor before he was eighteen. About ten years ago, he began introducing "real life" to Marvel's pages. "I was bored sick with what we were doing," he recalls. He began to deal with the comic-book adventures as "fairy tales for grownups. I thought, 'If a guy were superpowerful, how would he exist in the real world?'"

It was the kind of question that led to rent troubles for superheroes, girl trouble and a lot of lip from people who think a guy in a crazy-looking costume is a guy in a crazy-looking costume and not a superhero. "It would naturally follow," says Lee, "that we seem to be radical."

Imagination and topicality are taking comics in a direction that brooks no pussy-footing and borrows heavily from

"...The comics code administrator foresees the liberalization of provisions on sex..."

the headlines. In a recent issue of *Daredevil*, a bomb explodes in the Hilton Hotel (Walter Cronkite is at the scene) during a demonstration against Spiro Agnew. The bomb turns out to be the work of a maddened right-wing Hollywood film actor who hopes to discredit the peace movement. Agnew puts in frequent appearances in today's comics. On one occasion, Iron Man turns to Thor as the two arrive at a superheroes' summit meeting and quips: "From the glum looks on their faces, Thunder God, I'd say that something big is up. Either the earth's been invaded . . . or Spiro Agnew just made another speech!"

How far the imagination can go is limited by the Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America, a document adopted by the major publishers on October 26, 1954, when juvenile delinquency was a major problem and comics had been pilloried for their violence, gore and sexiness.

Both Stan Lee and Carmine Infantino, at 45 another veteran of the comics' travails, would like to see the code liberalized. Reminiscent of the old Hays code that rigidly constrained the motion picture industry for many years, the Comics Code sets strict standards for its subscribing members.

Its seal, imprinted on the covers of the subscribing publications, whose titles account for well over 90 per cent of all comic books sold in the country, is a sign of adherence to provisions governing advertising and the portrayal of crime, evil, bloodshed, violence, profanity, obscenity, religion, nudity, marriage and sex.

"Some of it," says Infantino, a newly appointed member of the eight-member board that represents publishers, distributors, engravers and printers, "is ridiculous."

Infantino, who joined National Periodicals about 25 years ago and used to draw *Batman*, is now campaigning for an end to restrictions on stories involving narcotics. "I feel very strongly about it," he says. "I don't believe in hiding your head in the sand."

Lee, too, would like to see a change. "I feel that comics could do much good as far as helping kids avoid the danger of drugs."

But Leonard Darvin, a lawyer who is the code administrator, believes it is a poor idea. The power to change the code in respect to narcotics rests with the board, but the 60-year-old Darvin can remember when the wave of revulsion against the industry's excesses swept away more than 30 publishers and

dumped circulation from a peak of about 650 million in 1953 to about 200 million within a few years.

Each month he reviews about 100 comic books for adherence to the code, and recommends necessary pre-publication changes. Although he frowns on any change in the code with respect to narcotics, he can foresee changes that would at least liberalize some provisions on sex to reflect, if only slightly, the new permissiveness in motion pictures.

Although Lee and Infantino would like to see a liberalization that would permit them to reflect the world of the 1970s more accurately, neither finds it remarkably difficult to exist within the code's provisions.

"The world," observes Lee, "is a little more liberal now."

And radical, too.

Lib vs. Love

Women's Lib is finding its way into the love-and-romance branch of the comics industry.

Marvel's *My Love* recently ran a story entitled "His Hair Is Long But I Love Him," the saga of a girl who dates a shaggy drop-out rock singer against her parents' wishes. To our great surprise, the parents are won over in the end, and the girl does not end up with the nice, square clod who really loves her.

In another adventure, Lorna, college activist, develops a crush on her art instructor, who finally notices her and asks her out on the night of a big protest rally. Lorna's friends call her a sellout and she soliloquizes: "I'm chickening out—on my own principles." Finally she picks the protest over the prof, reasoning, "I couldn't betray my beliefs—just for a boy!" But happy surprise. Teach shows up, too and says, "What makes you think that all faculty members are opposed to student rights? Has it ever occurred to you that a member of the establishment can also want justice for everyone?"

The pair march off into the sunset with their twin picket signs, and Lorna coos: "You've taught me that a girl can be true to her convictions—without losing what she wants most."

Replies her beloved: "And after all, darling, isn't that where it's really at?"

So far, nothing in the comics on the Gay Liberation Front. —V.G.

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